Interview with Joseph Toner

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOSEPH TONER

Interviewed by: Melbourne Spector

Initial interview date: October 31, 1989

Q: This is an interview with Joseph Toner on October 31, 1989. We are chatting in his living room in Holland Hills, Virginia. Joseph Toner has had a very distinguished career in the foreign affairs area. He served in the Neutral Security Agency, the Foreign Operations Administration, International Cooperation Administration, the Development Loan Fund, the Agency for International Development, and he has also served in other foreign affairs institutions. He has been a mission director in several overseas missions. And Mr. Toner is still at it.

My name is Melbourne Spector. I am the project director of the Marshall Plan Oral History Project of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program under the aegis of the Association for Diplomatic Studies with offices in the Lauinger Library at Georgetown University.

This study is focusing on the organizational and management aspects of the Marshall Plan and its immediate successive agencies. So we will now begin with Mr. Toner, and I am going to take the opportunity of calling him Joe, and I hope he calls me Mel, since we are old friends.

Joe, tell me, how were you so lucky? How did you get into the Marshall Plan and why, and so on?

TONER: Well, after working four years at the Public Administration Planning House in Chicago, I decided it was time to get my feet wet and get some real governmental experience. So I filled out a Personnel Form 57, which was used at that time, and sent it into Washington to a number of agencies that I thought I could interest. Much to my surprise, I got evidence of interest in reasonable time and went to Washington to meet the principals.

Q: This year was about when?

TONER: This was in the late '60s.

Q: '60s?

TONER: No, I'm sorry. It was in the early '50s, yes.

Q: Early '50s.

TONER: Early '50s. Among the responses that interested me most was the one from ECA. They had sent my 57 to the Executive Secretariat, which was run at that point by John Gange and Gordon Reckord. John was the Executive Secretary. Gordon was his deputy. By the time I got to Washington, John had left. I think he had gone to State; I'm not sure. And Gordon was in charge.

After a couple days of meetings, Gordon offered me a job at a Grade 12 or Grade 13; I'm not sure. I said yes. By the time I got to Washington, another appropriation cut had been made, and the job was no longer available. This happened periodically in the Foreign Aid Agency.

Q: Yes, it does.

TONER: So I went to work for Housing and Home Finance Agency as a program analyst. After a year in there, I had a call from Gordon saying that they had money again and was I still interested. I was. Gordon said there was some urgency in terms of my coming because he had a long-scheduled vacation and asked me if I could make it in two weeks, and I did. I had two days briefing from Gordon before we left for the west coast.

Q: Just two days?

TONER: Two days. And after he had been gone for two and a half weeks, I had a phone call from Gordon saying that he had been offered a tenured position in Oregon as an assistant professor of geography, and he accepted, and he wouldn't be back. Given the fact that the change in administration is imminent, the agency had few options, so they put me in the job. That was how I entered the Foreign Aid Program business.

There was a document that was immensely helpful, which had been drafted by committee made up of the current executive secretaries around town. John Gange and Gordon had both made substantial contributions to it. And other contributions had come from AEC and State, among other agencies. It spelled out how a secretary should work. And it was obviously being used by both John at Princeton and Gordon at the University of Oregon for teaching purposes.

The subject of secretariats, this was a useful guide. But the subject of secretariats first intrigued me when I heard about it from Don Price. Don was the Associate Director of the Public Administration Clearing House and had worked with me at Brownlow in one of the early Hoover Commission reports. In the course—it was a study of the presidency—and one of Don's assignments had been to take a look at the British Cabinet Secretariat to see what its applicability might be to the U.S. Government. Don spent some time in England on

this and had written a number of papers for the Clearing House files, which I had access to.

Q: This was before you came to Washington?

TONER: Yes, before I came to Washington. So I had read about it, and I had talked with Don. I was intrigued. I found that both John Gange, who I got to know well, and Gordon were both true believers. They said that the most difficult part of an executive secretary's job would be the education of the administrator of the agency. The secretariat had to service the top management, but it also had to service the agency. It was a two-way communication target. The most important thing was to get the confidence of both, but particularly the administrator, so he could move forward in the operation.

When I came in the agency, Averell Harriman was titular head, but really Ty Wood, as deputy director, ran the operation. Yes. The problem here, given the imminent change of administrations, the new director or new administrator of the agency was coming in to replace both Harriman and Wood. This man turned out to be Harold Stassen, who was a former governor of Minnesota and a frequent competitor for Republican nomination for the presidency.

Much to my surprise, Stassen quickly absorbed the concept of secretariat and became an enthusiastic convert. The problem, as I saw it, was how to make sure that he saw everything that was coming into the agency that required top management attention. Since each of the regional administrators, all housed in Washington, had their separate communication channels, this meant capturing their mail and also keying into what they sent out. This was accomplished.

The next problem was to make sure that each of them saw what the others were receiving and acting on. The handy way of meeting this challenge was the creation of what we called the daily log.

Q: Let's go back a minute, Joe. You saw you captured it. How did you capture it?

TONER: First, what I did I had a member of my staff sitting in each of their offices, who would, in fact, be there when their mail came in and make copies of their mail. So that I had it there for Stassen to read and also, at the same time, gave it to the other regional administrators.

Q: Now when you say the mail, the mail could have been a letter?

TONER: Letter, telegram.

Q: Airgram.

TONER: Airgram. It also could have been a meeting.

So I had to have people sit in them, their staff meetings and their key substantive meetings to do a record. It also meant capturing their action assignments that they gave out, each of the regional administrators, and putting them in the daily log as well.

The log, which was initially envisioned as a very thin document with a limited distribution, grew so that it became—we started including press clippings about programmatic matters. It ended up a fairly thick document, which was compiled every night and put in their desks at the opening of the following day's business.

The concern of most of the top staff was a question of security, to what extent would their secrets be out and be subject to invidious comment. We had to establish our credentials as being impartial, unbiased. And in time, I think we sold this point of view to all of them and got their cooperation because, this way, they had access to what the administrator was getting in his direct channel from other government agencies, like the White House, like State Department, Defense Department. And it provided the useful guidance for all of them. So they recognized it as a valuable resource. And they were delighted to use it.

Q: Quid pro quo in a way.

TONER: Yes.

Q: They were getting something for what they were giving.

TONER: The next problem was one raised in the field by visiting mission directors who came into Washington who wanted to see this also. I recognized the utility of this for them, but the problems were magnified given the great number of missions we had overseas and the degrees of relevance of some of this material for them.

We put out two variations of the daily log. One was a top-secret log that went to the key missions and the regional organizations on a weekly basis. The second was a less classified—I think confidential or LOU, limited to official use—document that went weekly to the mission directors.

In all cases, the instructions were clear that this was for their use only. I think this was generally not observed. I think they, depending upon their judgment, would share this with members of their staff, senior members of the staff. And the concern that we all had would there be leaks that would be embarrassing to the agency. It didn't develop in the years of my familiarity with secretariat operations. There was no real leak that caused any embarrassment.

The problems of dealing with the Congress were critical, as they always are.

Q: Can we go back a minute, please?

TONER: Sure.

Q: On the daily log, what was the distribution here in Washington? It was a limited distribution, of course.

TONER: Yes, it was a limited distribution, principally to the—first of all, the regional administrators. And then as it developed, they asked for additional copies for other key members of their staff. Eventually, it grew to the point where the logs went to everybody who attended the administrator's staff meetings. However, there were variations in terms of content. We used our judgment in terms of what should be restricted in terms of distribution, particularly when it came to discussions in meetings and action assignments, memoranda, dealings with Congress, and White House matters.

Again, there was no problem that I became aware of any leaks from this group. And the administrator was never embarrassed by the fact that these documents were circulating throughout the agency in varying degrees.

The matter of covering the administrator was manpower consuming because he had a great many meetings every day. I tried to have somebody from our staff sit in on most of them and take notes, particularly in terms of follow-up actions that might be required and discussions that had some relevance for the other staff. This called for having a staff of people who were quick and bright and discreet. And we were lucky to have them. But sometimes, they ran ragged trying to keep up with the administrator's schedule, particularly when you had a reactive man like Stassen. The problem was one of keeping up with him. This generally meant that I had to get in very early in the morning and work late at night trying to keep him posted in what was going on that I knew of. It frequently involved my flying with him as he went off to make a speech in order to review the day's happening at the only time we could catch him.

Q: A captive audience.

TONER: Yes. But that was a lot of fun. If I had to do it all over again, I would.

Q: Wonderful. That's the best statement you can make.

TONER: I didn't really realize how important this was until Stassen left the program, and I began dealing with his successors, most of whom were unfamiliar with the secretariat function and didn't view this with the same concentration that Stassen had given it. It played a lesser role thereafter as the successors felt a need for greater control of the flow of information.

Q: You had began to mention Congress, the relationships with Congress.

TONER: Yes, particularly during the time that the agency had its hearings. Between the secretariat and the congressional liaison staff, we had frequent reporting on agency officials meeting with committees, subcommittees, and members on the Hill. We had to get this information circulated quickly throughout the agency so that our various witnesses didn't trip over each other. While the principal responsibility was in the congressional liaison staff, the secretariat played a role within the agency of the dissemination of the information to the backstop people. Again, to the extent that I am aware of, there was no embarrassment caused by the kind of reporting we did.

The whole question of congressional relations is a problem that is difficult for every administrator and a key function and has bedeviled the program in all the years since the agency first began. I think that the secretariat is best viewed as a communications vehicle and that the manner in which the information was collected and disseminated was a key.

The key to this was the acceptability of the secretariat personnel. Apart from our products, our publications, the staff had to have enough sense not to talk unless invited and not be a burden on the other organizational units. Whenever we found that one of our staffers wasn't contributing to this end, we had to get rid of him. Quickly. But our staff remained fairly stable. We had substantial continuity over the years.

Q: I want to ask you about the clearance—I guess "process," you would call it—of outgoing mail, both for the administrator and for the regional directors. I remember that, at least

that I ever saw, it had to be fairly carefully cleared. Wasn't that another function of the secretariat?

TONER: Yes, it was. You are right. It was critical to make sure that the communications going out reflected the past and present agency policy. This meant that the person who first saw the communication in our staff had to put a routing on it that covered all of the affected offices and set up rules for its action on it, which included determining who should sign the response and who should clear it. This was all put on a routing slip that went on each incoming communication. Again, it was our job to see it that the key people were cognizant of everything going on.

Occasionally, there was some question of our judgment, but as there would be, given the thousands of pieces of paper that we used to deal with. But there were no major problems.

Q: What if you had a conflict between two different, say, bureau chiefs? I mean, the regional man had a disagreement with the lady who was in charge of, say, science and technology?

TONER: In a case like that, we would buck it to whoever the administrator felt could resolve the issue if it was a substantive issue. In many cases, this was the administrator himself. But this didn't happen very often. This was a relatively rare occurrence.

Q: Not something that your staff would try to resolve?

TONER: No, we would have somebody else try to do it. Again, it is a judgment call. There are some matters which are minor, which I thought we could handle without any problem. But if it was a major policy, I want an executive in the line to be involved. So it was just a judgment call.

Q: Yes. When you send a document to the administrator where he had to make a judgment, did you—

TONER: I would give him a note.

Q: Give him a note. Why don't you tell me about it?

TONER: Well, I give him a note indicating, first of all, what the issue is and what the conflicting views were in summary. Then I would sometimes make a suggestion as to how it might be resolved or who might resolve it. The administrator would review this and indicate what he wanted to have done with it.

This was an interesting exercise. Over the years, we got so that we could anticipate how the administrator would react in a given problem.

Q: Can you think of any examples of that? Any anecdotes, a fairly interesting one or one that's of interest?

TONER: I don't think so. These were all quick action things, and none of them remain in my mind.

Q: Another thing that I, as a receiver of your work, when I was in the field—I was in Mexico when I believe you were in your early days of executive secretariat to Governor Stassen. And one thing I appreciated was sometimes you would send out just informational material, which we never, being out on the ends of wherever we were, we weren't getting. So would you talk about that a minute? It was very useful to us.

TONER: Again, this was a judgmental-call situation. We were afraid of loading down the field with more stuff to read than they had time for. So we had to exercise some judgment in terms of what not to send them, just for fear of clogging the machinery. But when we would see interesting stuff in the press or in the journals, we would make copies.

Q: Yes, I remember we used to get the whole article, for instance.

TONER: Yes. We put out a series of what we called Secretariat Notes.

Q: Yes, that's it.

TONER: We keep these circulating in the agency itself, in the headquarters and frequently to the field.

Q: Joe, I would like you to summarize what you think the overall functions of the secretariat should be.

TONER: I think, in summary, the secretariat is a vehicle for communication to and from the administrator and the agency working stiffs. The function is to make sure that both the administrator and his staff are aware of current policy and of events that are occurring that might affect that policy. This involves not only the communications flow, but the control of information stemming from meetings with other agencies that have a bearing.

This is a function that later evolved in the White House when the Cabinet Secretariat was formed and where each Cabinet member had an assistant who would sit in for him at the White House as a Cabinet agenda was developed for each meeting. He was also present for the debriefing by the Cabinet secretary of the meetings of the Cabinet—this would occur on the same day as the Cabinet meeting—and which assignments were made to which Cabinet members. This was interesting because you've got the view of the President and his principal Cabinet members on policy issues that would be before the Cabinet.

The Cabinet Secretary that I got to know well was Max Rabb. Max later became our ambassador to Italy. But he was very good in his job. It so happened that the people who attended his meetings were, in many cases, the executive secretaries of respective agencies. So we had this channel of information also working for us.

Q: Very good.

TONER: We were hesitant to broadcast this kind of information too broadly because we couldn't control its dissemination. And we didn't want to get the White House upset with us.

Q: Sure.

TONER: In terms of other functions of the Secretariat, apart from the ones I've already mentioned, I think that it is hard for me at this point—ten years after retirement—to distinguish between my functions in the secretariat and my functions as the Director of Personnel and my functions as the mission director. They tend to overlap. But they are all involved in terms of servicing the agency and various forms of communication.

I admired the way this function was handled in the State Department by a succession of very able people and gained an institutional footing in the Department that guaranteed its continuation as a very useful arm of the secretary.

I think that there are obviously things that we didn't know and wouldn't know that were known only to the administrator in terms of his relationship with his principal officers. Some of this we could sense, and some of this we couldn't. But we had to frequently make guesses as to whether or not an administrator was happy or unhappy with any of his senior officers in terms of the kinds of assignment that he would tend to give them. When we guessed wrong, we would be so advised by the administrator. [Telephone interruption; tape recorder turned off]

Q: You were talking about the administrator and his relationships with his top staff.

TONER: Well, the issue here, so far as I was concerned, was that I had to have sufficient confidence—have the confidence of the administrator to the extent that he would tell me what he felt he could about his people and what he wanted them to do from time to time, or wanted them not to do from time to time, as a guide in terms of how I disseminate information to them or from them.

Another issue that arose frequently was when a deputy administrator was present, and I was never sure to what extent he was cut in to what was going on. I had to make guesses. My assumption, one I had to use normally, was that he was current and was, in fact, the man who could act for the administrator. I learned that, depending upon the issue, this is not always so.

Q: It changes with administrators and deputies.

TONER: Yes. I can't think of how much else I could tell you. That generally covers the secretariat function. It is just a very fast moving, evolving function. And, as I said earlier, the principal issue here was the degree to which the administrator was willing to accept the function.

Q: Whether he or she accepted it and wanted to use it.

TONER: Yes.

Q: And understood it.

TONER: Yes. That is certainly true.

Q: Yes. Joe, you made one of your points, a basic point, about communication not only of your time as an executive secretary, but in time as a mission director, your time in other positions that you have had, your time as Director of Personnel. How important is communication?

TONER: Well, I think it is the critical issue for all these assignments. I don't know of any substitute for letting your people know what is going on.

Q: And your people letting you know what is going on.

TONER: Yes. It has to be a two-way street. It has to be based upon confidence at both ends.

Q: How about lateral communication between bureaus, between sections, between divisions?

TONER: Well, I found that in most cases, the executive in each of these lateral entities would, as a matter of self-interest, make some determination as to who they thought had a need to know. We would superimpose on them our judgment if we thought it was called for on the information flow. The point here was that you had to tread carefully in order not to louse up our relationships.

Q: Yes.

TONER: With man A as opposed to man B. But somebody had to make the call, so we did.

Q: On communication, what are the various means of communication? One would be your documents, your papers.

TONER: Another would be meetings.

Q: Meetings. Your documents could be incoming, outgoing correspondence.

TONER: Records of meetings. Memorandum of conservation. And, of course, cables.

Q: Did you require people to make memorandums of conversation even if you did have one of your people there? Say someone was having a meeting outside the agency. Did you try to get memos of conversation from them?

TONER: I couldn't. If for their own reasons they wrote memorandum of conversation, I could capture it and frequently distribute it. But this is tricky business. And I couldn't force anybody to record this. So coverage was incomplete.

Q: One thing I remember you did—this is a little bit beyond the time span of this particular study we are doing, but I think it is important—is that when AID was being set up, and it was just being organized with a lot of brand-new people, you instigated—and I am saying you because I was ashamed it wasn't me, because I was then in personnel, and I should have thought of it—but you instigated having a meeting at Camp David. Do you remember that?

TONER: Yes.

Q: Do you want to tell me how that came about?

TONER: I wasn't the one that instigated this. This was the administrator.

Q: I'll be darned. All these years I've been giving you the credit.

TONER: Thanks, but it was really Stassen. Another one of Stassen's ideas.

Q: It was Stassen? This was when AID was set up. We had a meeting in Camp David.

TONER: Yes.

Q: I don't know who was there—there was LaBolese. What was his name? From New York.

TONER: The lawyer?

Q: Yes, the lawyer. Fowler.

TONER: Fowler Hamilton.

Q: Yes.

TONER: I don't remember much about that.

Q: I remember that wherever I got the order, it was from you.

TONER: Right. That was the channel.

Q: I doubt if Fowler Hamilton had that kind of ideas.

TONER: Well, Fowler was one of the more interesting administrators I worked with. He was an insomniac. He needed very little sleep, and it made life hell for his staff. He would usually show up to work at 6:00, between 6:00 and 7:00 in the morning with half a dozen dictatapes from the night.

Q: Good Lord.

TONER: A very articulate gentleman. Very vocal. And very difficult to capture a portion of his time to fill him in on what was going on. And a man of strong varied views on every issue of the day. The days of rest we had are when he had to go out of town for meetings. It would give us a chance to get caught up. But he was a man who had been scheduled initially in the administration to be the head of Central Intelligence. When that failed within the administration, when he wasn't selected for that job, the Mutual Security Program was his fallback. He had frequent conflicts with the State Department, as do many of our administrators.

Q: Let's talk about that for a minute. What about totally the relationships with the State Department when you first came in? I would like to hear your comments on it.

TONER: Well, initially they were very good and very warm. Our secretariat and the state secretariat—

[End Tape 1, Side 1. Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Q: You were speaking about relationships with the State Department secretariat.

TONER: Yes. Since we were both in the same business, it was relatively easy to talk with them. There was some hesitation on the part of both of us in terms of divulging information which still might be in the sensitive stage of AID-State relationships, particularly when our respective leaders were moving in divergent courses.

At one point, we had decided that it would be useful to have an exchange program between us to familiarize our respective staffs on the other agency and how they did business. This broke down after a short time, but we could learn a lot from the State Department secretariat. It was useful information. Luke Battle.

Q: Luke Battle was the—

TONER: At that time, the head of the Secretariat.

Q: This is Lucius Battle.

TONER: Right. Later, ambassador; later, assistant secretary. A very bright and able guy. And on many issues we could talk. The AID executive secretary and the Department secretary resolved some issues that could prove troublesome otherwise. But, generally, we were each focused internally on our respective operations. And so it went.

Q: As I recall, the general wisdom of the time was that there was a division of labor between the State Department and what then was the Foreign Operations Administration. "The State Department would lay down policy, and they would set policy."

TONER: Yes.

Q: And FOA would carry it out. They were the operating agency.

TONER: That's right.

Q: How did that work in day-to-day life?

TONER: It didn't. Generally, in terms of foreign policy, there weren't many policy issues which we were involved in that posed conflicts. I think the principal issue was the fact that we couldn't operate in countries if the Department felt that it was inappropriate for the U.S. to be working there. Thus, they would determine which areas of the world we would work. It would have a strong point of view as to the volume of assistance that would be appropriate for any given region or any given country. And where we disagreed, this would be resolved between the two agencies, usually by the President.

Otherwise, our relationship was generally from that of a renter and an owner of property we were concerned with. We were concerned with how much space we had in headquarters as opposed to State Department's urgent need for more space all the time. These were the day-to-day issues that took up time, but weren't within the purview of the secretariat, happily.

Q: Yes. A part of the problem that I ran into was that State would have the best money than AID would. And they felt, "Well, you can go out and rent space, whereas we can't."

TONER: Yes.

Q: "We" being the State Department.

TONER: Yes.

Q: How about your relations, generally, as you look back on it with, say, the Foreign Service as distinct from the AID Foreign Service?

TONER: I didn't have many problems with the Foreign Service as such. Again, these were all handled in the personnel shop. I became aware of some of them, but I was not involved with them at that time. Later, when I moved to personnel, I became—

Q: More aware.

TONER: More aware of the problems with Foreign Service.

Q: Didn't you have part in making the two systems more alike?

TONER: Like other personnel directors of AID, I tried wherever possible to confirm our systems to reduce the areas of confusion that would particularly arise in the field. This had to do with questions of titles, ranks, grades, and the issues of that kind, which involved daily living. But I tend to think of that more as my field operations rather than the secretariat operations.

Q: Yes, right. Well, I think we have pretty well covered the secretariat. I appreciate it.

TONER: Well, I enjoyed it.

Q: Thank you very much.

TONER: With great pleasure. It got me to thinking about things I haven't thought about for years. I've lost track of the secretariats of both AID and State in recent years. I have been more involved with EPA, particularly this year.

End of interview